Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 52
Issue 1 *October 2012/November 2012*

Article 2

11-2012

Addressing Reading Underachievement in African American Boys through a Multi-Contextual Approach

Terry Husband
Illinois State University

Addressing Reading Underachievement in African American boys through a Multi-Contextual Approach

Terry Husband, Ph.D.
Illinois State University

Abstract

Much has been written about reading disparities between African American males and other student groups. Interestingly, the majority of this scholarship focuses on African American males at pre-adolescent states of development and beyond. To date, relatively little has been documented relative to improving reading outcomes in African American males in early childhood and elementary contexts. The purpose of this article is to present a multi-contextual framework for improving reading outcomes in African American boys in P-5 contexts specifically. I conclude with a discussion of three important commitments that teachers and administrators must be willing to embrace in order for these strategies to produce successful results.

Introduction

The reading achievement gap between African American males and other student groups is well documented in the educational scholarship (NCES, 2006; NCES, 2010). Scholars (e.g., Anderson, Howard, & Graham, 2007; Below, Skinner, Fearrington, & Sorrell, 2010; Chatterji, 2006; Haddix, 2009; Tatum, 2008) identify a wide range of explanations why African American males demonstrate lower reading achievement than other student populations. Notably, much of this scholarship focuses on African American males at pre-adolescent stages of development and beyond. To date, little has been documented relative to reading underachievement

in African American boys in early childhood and early elementary contexts specifically. Given this absence of scholarship on African American boys and reading achievement, the purpose of the article is two fold. First, this article outlines factors that contribute to reading underachievement in African American boys. Next, as a solution to this issue, this article presents a multi-contextual approach to addressing this issue. It is important to note here that not "all" African American boys are underachieving in reading. Therefore, the fundamental intention within this article is not to demonize African American boys and to perpetuate a deficit discourse (Haddix, 2009) on this issue. Instead, the multi-contextual approach discussed in this article centers on possibilities for curriculum, teachers, and schools rather than suggestions for African American boys and parents. It is also important to note here that African American boys are not homogeneous in nature, thus the strategies discussed in this article are not presented as "magic solutions" that will be effective with every African American boy in every classroom. This article takes into account the complexity of their (African American boys) identity as being members of two historically underachieving student groups (boys and African American) in reading. In clearer terms, this article considers how gender related factors and racial/cultural factors individually and collectively contribute to reading underachievement in African American boys.

Gender Differences that Affect Reading Achievement

Although boys and girls experience the same reading instruction in most classrooms, boys and girls engage in reading in different ways (Smith, 1990; Twist, Gnaldi, & Schagen, 2004). These differences are frequently used to explain reading achievement gaps between boys and girls. In order to gain insight into how these differences might impact African American boys, I review the extant research on gender differences in reading in early childhood and elementary contexts.

Reading Attitudes

Smith (1990) defines reading attitudes as "a state of mind, accompanied by feelings and emotions, that make reading more or less probable" (p. 215). There is a strong correlation between students' attitudes toward reading and the ways in which they engage in reading activities in and out of school. Essentially, students with positive attitudes toward reading will engage in reading more often and with less resistance than students who have negative attitudes toward reading (McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Girls tend to have more overall

favorable attitudes toward reading than boys (Kush & Watkins, 1996; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004; Smith, 1990). Differences in reading attitudes between boys and girls have been offered as one explanation behind why girls demonstrate high levels of reading achievement than boys. For example, in a recent study involving 288 average 3rd grade readers, Marinak and Gambrell (2010) note two important findings with regard to boys and girls and their attitudes toward reading. First, the boys in their study experienced less personal enjoyment while reading than girls. Second, the boys in the study reported seeing less overall "value" in reading than girls. This scholarship presents an important insight into understanding possible causes of reading underachievement in African American boys. If African American boys, much like the boys in this work, experience minimal enjoyment while reading and see less overall value in reading than girls, it is plausible that they are engaging in reading and reading related activities (e.g., summarizing texts, reviewing sight words, practicing decoding skills, etc.) with much more resistance than girls. It is further likely that this resistance toward reading and reading related activities in and out of school has an impact on reading achievement outcomes, as reading engagement is directly linked to reading development (Logan & Johnston, 2009).

Not only do boys have less favorable attitudes toward reading than girls, their (boys) attitudes toward reading tend to deteriorate over time (Kush & Watkins, 1996; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004; Smith, 1990). An example of this pattern of deterioration is seen in McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth's, (1995) study with fourth grade boys. The researchers document a gradual decline in positive attitudes toward academic and recreational reading among fourth-grade boys that began early in their schooling careers. Researchers (i.e., Askov & Fischbach, 1973; McKenna et al., 1995) often attribute changes in the level of difficulty of texts and skills needed to reading fluently as potential reasons behind this decline in positive attitudes among boys. What this work suggests is that boys attitudes toward reading become increasingly more negative at the same time that the tasks and skills required to read fluently become more complicated. This work can be used to potentially explain why the reading achievement disparities between African American boys and other students groups that emerge in early childhood become progressively worse with time.

Reading Preferences

Boys and girls prefer reading different kinds of texts (Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish & Shapiro, 2007). Boys tend to prefer reading texts that center on the

following themes: action; non-fiction; violent and scary fairy tales; super heroes; bodily humor; puns; video games and jokes (Bosacki, Elliott, Bajovic & Akseer, 2009; Brozo, 2002; Collins-Standley, Gan, Yu & Zillman, 1996). In addition, boys prefer reading texts with positive male characters as the main character in the text (Brozo, 2002; Millard, 1997; Smith, 2004; Sullivan, 2004). Unfortunately, the vast majority of the children's literature used in most early childhood and elementary classrooms consist do not embody the themes and characters that respond to boys' preferences (Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Consequently, boys are often less motivated to engage with texts in the classroom than girls. Again, disengagement with texts has a direct impact on reading achievement. In keeping with this frame of thought, it is possible that African American boys are not engaging with texts at school as often or to the same degree as girls due to a lack of access to texts that speak to the reading preferences of boys. To this end, it is also possible that this lack of engagement with text is contributing to reading underachievement in African American boys as well.

Not only do boys and girls differ in *what* they prefer to read, they also differ in *how* they prefer to read texts (Boltz, 2007; Clark, 2006; Sullivan, 2004). Boys tend to prefer reading for practical, analytical, informational, and directional purposes, while girls tend to prefer to read in ways that allow and encourage the reader to explain the literary qualities of a work (i.e., rhythm, imagery, metaphor) and depart from ordinary diction (Clark, 2006). Based on these differences, boys tend to navigate toward texts that explain how the world around them functions. As such, boys tend to be drawn toward reading newspapers, how-to manuals, and other short informational texts more often than girls. Notably, the majority of the texts used in early childhood and elementary classroom settings require "aesthetic" reading skills and center on narrative text structures (Sullivan, 2004). These types of texts are more consistent with the reading preferences of girls than boys. For instance, in a two-year qualitative investigation, Clarke (2006) notes significant differences in the ways in which boys and girls were positioned during literature circle discussions. In short, during the 4th grade year, many of the boys in the study were disempowered by the use of literature circles while the girls were simultaneously empowered by the use of literature circles. More specifically, Clarke documents incidents during the literature circles where the girls answered questions for the boys and or completely ignored the requests of particular boys in the group. Even more so, Clarke notes a particular instance where the boy who was assigned to be the literature circle facilitator by the classroom teacher was completely stripped of his position by the girls within his group. To this end, the boys in the study became even more disempowered by the use of literature circles during their 5th grade year at school. Ultimately, what

this study suggests is that reading instructional methods that are often designed to "open-up" discussions around texts and increase reading engagement may actually work to "close down" discussions for boys (based on the ways in which they respond to how boys prefer to read texts). In keeping with this school of thought, it is probable that the way in which a text is or is not read can be considered as an additional factor that contributes to reading underachievement in African American boys.

Neurological Differences

Recent neuroscience research provides evidence that boys and girls have distinct neurological differences that can impact how boys and girls learn (Brizendine, 2006; Gurian, 2001; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Sax, 2005; Sax, 2006; Spironelli, Penolazzi, & Angrilli, 2010). First, while the brains of boys and girls tend to develop along the same lines, girls tend to have more neurons in the brain areas devoted to language (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Next, the areas of the brain associated with language and fine motor skills mature about six years earlier in girls than boys (Hamlon, Thatcher & Cline, 1999). Third, the areas of the brain associated with spatial memory mature almost four years earlier in boys than they do in girls (Hamlon, Thatcher & Cline, 1999). Finally, girls tend to have more estrogen, oxytocin, and dopamine in their brains than boys. At the same time, boys tend to have more testosterone in their brains than girls (Gurian, 2001).

Neurological differences between boys and girls can impact reading achievement in several ways. As a result of having more neurons in the areas of the brain that are devoted to language, girls tend to have less difficulty acquiring and utilizing the language and verbal skills (i.e., oral language, oral comprehension, vocabulary) embedded in reading processes than boys (Sax, 2006). Additionally, due to chemical differences within the brains of boys and girls, girls are better suited to participate fully and successfully in traditional reading activities. In clearer terms, estrogen, oxytocin, and dopamine (which are typically more prevalent in the brains of girls) produce feelings of satisfaction and contentment within the brain. As such, these chemicals make it easier for girls to read silently and independently for extended periods of time than boys. In contrast, testosterone (which is typically more prevalent in the brains of boys than girls) is linked to aggressive, competitive, and impulsive behavior patterns in boys (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Having large quantities of testosterone in their brains makes it more difficult for boys to sit quietly for long periods of time and to read independently than girls. Essentially, these neurological differences make it much easier for girls to develop and utilize the skills needed

during reading interactions (i.e., read quietly, respond verbally, sit for extended periods of time) than boys. While most boys have to develop these skills in order to participate in reading activities fully and successfully, girls tend to have brains that are "pre-wired" in ways that encourage, support, and facilitate successful participation in reading activities naturally. Further, in as much as these neurological differences provide insight into explaining reading disparities between girls and boys in general, these neurological differences also provide insight into understanding reading underachievement in African American boys as well.

Factors that Impact Reading Achievement in African American Males

There is a significant body of scholarship that examines possible causes of academic underachievement in African American males in general (e.g. Holzman, 2004; Kunjufu, 1982; Noguera, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999). As a result, I purposely choose not to review the scholarship on achievement and African American males here. Instead, given the central focus of this article on reading underachievement in African American boys, I review factors related to African American males and reading underachievement exclusively. As I mentioned previously, the majority of the scholarship on reading and African American males centers on African American males in pre-adolescent stages of development and beyond. While there are certainly developmental considerations that must be taken into account when applying this work to African American boys in early childhood and elementary contexts, this scholarship, nonetheless, provides valuable insight into how cultural/racial factors contribute to reading underachievement in African American boys. Again, the factors outlined here are not to suggest that "all" African American males are affected by these factors or affected in the same ways. Moreover, these factors are not presented to generalize about reading underachievement in African American boys. Instead, these factors are presented to make the discourse around this issue more nuanced and more complicated. With that being said, I highlight factors that contribute to reading underachievement in African American males that are associated with three contexts within the schooling process: curriculum, classroom, and comprehensive school.

Curriculum Factors

One possible explanation behind reading underachievement in African American males concerns the texts that are available in most classrooms. Alfred

Tatum (2006) points out that many adolescent African American males do not read because the texts that are available for them to read are not socially and culturally consistent and authentic. In other words, in many classroom contexts African American males often are not presented with opportunities to read texts that reflect their cultural and communal lived experiences and realities. As a result, they (African American males) are more apprehensive about engaging in reading and reading related activities. Tatum further points out that some African American males may even go as far as withdrawing from reading entirely on the basis of having access to relevant and authentic texts. In keeping with this logic, it is plausible that many African American boys in early childhood and elementary classrooms are also disengaged during reading activities due to a lack of culturally consistent and authentic texts. Further, because there is a direct link between reading engagement and reaching achievement (Logan & Johnston, 2009), textual selection can be considered as a possible factor behind reading underachievement in African American boys.

In as much as the texts that are chosen for use with African American boys can contribute to reading underachievement in this group, the standards that teachers teach toward can contribute to reading achievement disparities as well. Current educational reform initiatives mandate for states to begin adopting "Common" or standardized reading curricula as a means of eliminating achievement disparities in particular student groups. Ironically, while these standards are designed to help African American males and other student groups who are experiencing reading achievement disparities in schools, they actually exacerbate this issue due to their little respect for how African American males live and learn literacy (Kirkland, 2011). Kirkland (2011) points out two important flaws that the current Common Core Standards in English and Language Arts with regard to African American males and reading. First, these standards, like most standards based curricula, fail to place the individuality of African American males at the center of the curriculum. Next, standards based curricula fail to offer socially and culturally relevant strategies for differentiating literacy instruction to meet the varied literacy needs and interests of African American males. Instead, standards based reading curricula tend to lead to teachers to relying disproportionately on whole group, scripted, and uniform approaches to teaching reading and writing as a means of helping students demonstrate mastery of narrow grade level standards on standardized reading assessments. These standards provide few opportunities for teachers to tailor their instructional practices to closely meet the needs and interests of individual African American boys in their classrooms. For example, let us suppose that a third grade teacher named Ms. Johnson has three African American boys in her classroom who are

reading at a 2nd grade reading level. The state mandated standards-based reading curriculum forces Ms. Johnson to ignore the specific needs of these boys and to attempt to teach them the third grade reading curriculum. Because these boys actually need reading instruction on their instructional level, they become highly disengaged during instances of reading instruction. At the end of the year, Ms. Johnson discovers that the boys are still reading at a 2nd grade reading level as they prepare to matriculate to 4th grade. Paradoxically, what was designed to eliminate reading achievement disparities in this group actually made these achievement disparities worsen. As consistent with this illustration, standards based and or "Common" reading and language arts curricula can be considered an additional factor that contributes to reading underachievement in African American boys.

Classroom Factors

Teachers who teach in ways that are consistent with the ways in which students prefer to learn are likely to produce greater achievement outcomes than teachers who teach in ways that are inconsistent with students' preferred learning styles (Morgan, 2010). Accordingly, researchers (Gay, 2000; Kuykendall, 1992; Shade, Kelly & Oberg, 1997) postulate that African American students benefit more often from instructional activities that are highly stimulating, active and arousing than from lecture style and teacher centered activities where they function as passive receptacles of information. Even more so, Webb-Johnson (2002) points out that African American males in particular respond better in instructional environments that center on great degrees of interaction, movement, and energy. Unfortunately, many early childhood and elementary teachers construct learning activities that do not take the specific learning styles of African American males into consideration when developing and implementing instructional activities (Boykin & Cunningham, 2001). Instead of teaching reading in ways that support, build on, and draw from the socially and culturally situated learning styles of African American males, many teachers teach in ways that are disconnected from and inconsistent with these learning styles. As a result, many African American boys in early childhood and elementary contexts continue to experience grave reading achievement disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

A second classroom factor that contributes to reading underachievement in African American boys concerns the ways in which texts are read in the classroom. Due to the No Child Left Behind legislature and other recent educational reform initiatives, teachers who teach in schools with significant numbers of African American males tend to teach in ways that place an overemphasis on helping students acquire the technical aspects of reading (Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron,

2005). Little or no attention is given toward reading critically or reading in ways that help students better understand the world around them and their role within in it. Accordingly, African American males tend to disengage from reading when the reading process is seen to have little or no real world or personal significance (Tatum, 2006). This is illustrated in Hall and Piazza's (2008) study involving middle school African American males. In this study, the researchers compare one group of middle school African American males who read texts critically and another group of middle school African American males who do not read texts critically. The researchers report that the groups of students who were encouraged to read the texts from more critical perspectives engaged with the texts more deeply than the groups of students who read the texts in more traditional ways. In addition, the students who read the texts critically reported more enjoyment while reading the other group of students. Essentially, the African American males who read the texts critically reported enjoying reading texts that closely corresponded with their personal definitions of the world around them. Further, while this study in of itself does not completely explain reading underachievement in African American boys, it, nonetheless, provides another possible reason why many African American boys tend to be less engaged with texts than other student group—as early childhood and elementary teachers tend to encourage student uncritically more often than reading critically (Vasquez, 2010).

Comprehensive School Factors

Institutionalized polices, procedures, and programs can have a direct impact on reading achievement in students of color (Huidor & Cooper, 2010). In view of that, one comprehensive school factor that can be used to explain reading underachievement in African American boys concerns institutional disciplinary practices. African American males are suspended at disproportionate rates in most schools (Brown, 2005; Kunjufu, 1982). This time spent out of school has a direct impact on academic achievement in general and reading achievement in particular (Mendez & Knoff, 2002). For instance, through an analysis of four years of archival data, Anderson, Howard, and Graham (2007) note a strong relationship between suspension rates and reading achievement in African American males in one large urban school district. The African American males who were suspended from school had lower levels of reading achievement than the other students who were not suspended from school. This study suggests that many of the disciplinary procedures aimed at correcting and eliminating unwanted behavior in and among African American

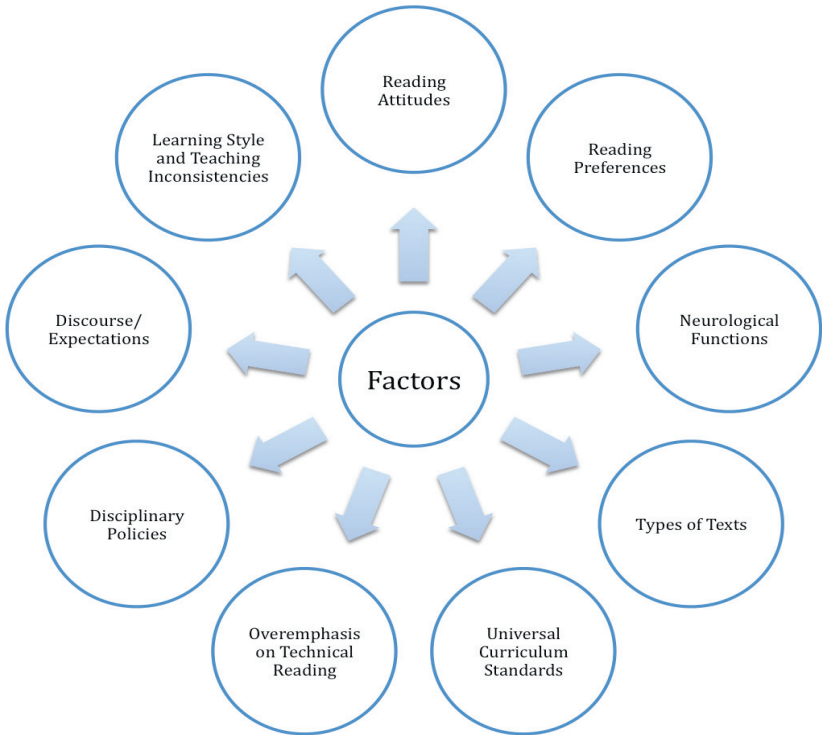
males may be having unintended negative consequences on reading achievement in this group. In this same vein, it is likely that African American boys who are suspended or expelled from school and or removed from class consistently as a disciplinary measure will not acquire the foundational reading skills necessary to become proficient readers. Further, because reading is a developmental process that depends on successful acquisition of series of previous skills, it is quite probable that dismissal from school will have a significant impact on reading achievement in African American boys in later years as well (Chall, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Another comprehensive school factor that contributes to reading underachievement in African American males concerns negative notions of African American males and literacy. Haddix (2009) points out that much of the public and research discourse surrounding African American males and literacy centers on a "failure" perspective (p 342). These dominant notions have a negative impact on both reading teachers and African American males. These low expectations stem from societal stereotypes about particular ethnic groups and academic achievement (Steele, 1997). Teachers who are impacted by these notions tend to have lower expectations for African American males. These lower expectations are often translated into pedagogical decisions and learning opportunities (Irving & Hudley, 2005; Kunjufu, 1989; Noguera, 2003). For example, let us suppose that Ms. Johnson holds a preconceived notion that African American boys are generally "poor readers". She is likely then to teach reading in ways that are consistent with this belief. Ms. Johnson is likely to ask lower level questions and or use only lower level basal texts during small-group reading instruction. At the same time, if the African American boys in her class internalize this negative discourse they will begin exerting less energy and effort into reading and other academic matters (Steel & Aronson, 1995). If they (African American males) see themselves as "poor", "struggling", or "non" readers, they are likely to be disengaged during reading activities and processes. Further, low levels of reading engagement will ultimately have direct impact on reading achievement outcomes in this group.

Using a Multi-Contextual Approach to Address Reading Underachievement

As discussed in much of this article, reading underachievement in African American boys is linked to multiple factors that span across multiple contexts (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Read Factors that Contribute to Reading Underachievement in African American Boys*



Given this basic premise, I espouse a multi-contextual approach to addressing reading underachievement in African American boys. Drawing from extant scholarship on practices that have been documented as producing positive outcomes with African American males, this framework focuses on possibilities for teachers and other school officials. In this sense, the multi-contextual framework draws from "what is" working in schools with African American males and applies these findings

to reading practices with African American boys, versus drawing from scholarship relative to what is not working with this population. To this end, the multi-contextual framework presented in the subsequent section encourages teachers and other school officials to work collaboratively and simultaneously within and across three critical contexts in the school to address this issue of reading underachievement in African American Boys.

Curriculum Context

One way that teachers can address reading underachievement in African American boys within the curriculum is by increasing the number of texts that are culturally relevant (Feger, 2006). By culturally relevant texts I mean texts in which the characters, events, settings, and ways of talking and interacting are similar to events, settings, and ways of talking and interacting in and among African American boys (Feger, 2006; Jackson & Boutte, 2009). African American boys are likely to be more engaged with texts when these texts reflect their lived experiences and realities (Tatum, 2006). As mentioned earlier in this article, increased reading engagement will likely lead to increased reading outcomes. It is important to note that African American culture is not monolithic in nature. Hence, teachers should consider two questions when selecting culturally relevant texts. First, teachers should consider the extent to which the texts that are selected for use with African American boys responds to and reflects the people, events, setting, and ways of talking and interacting of African American people in general. Additionally, teachers should also consider the degree to which the texts that are selected for use with African American boys respond to and reflect the people, events, settings, and ways of talking and interacting of the African American boys in that particular classroom context. The later question is important because it takes into account the differences and complexities within the African American culture as a whole. For instance, teachers who teach African American boys in Harlem should be especially concerned with texts that reflect life in Harlem, New York, whereas teachers who teach African American boys in Cleveland, Ohio should be concerned with locating texts that reflect life in Cleveland, Ohio. In attending to both of these questions, teachers are able to acquire and implement culturally relevant literature that reflects African American culture in both broad and specific contexts.

In addition to increasing the number of texts within the curriculum that are culturally relevant as a means of increasing reading achievement in African American boys, teachers should also increase the number of texts that are available within the reading curriculum that center on African American male characters as

the main characters in the texts. As mentioned previously in this article, boys in general prefer reading texts with a male character as the main character in the text (Brozo, 2002). This has been attributed to the fact that boys enjoy reading about characters with whom they have something in common, can identify and can serve as role models for the future. In view of that, teachers should increase the number of texts that specifically include African American males as the main characters in the texts. African American boys are likely to read more often when texts are available within the reading curriculum that have main characters with whom they can identify with and or look up to as a role model. Further, because there is a direct relationship between reading frequency and reading achievement (Logan & Johnston, 2009), it plausible that reading texts more frequently will lead to improvements in reading achievement outcomes.

A final strategy that I shall mention here for teachers to use to address reading underachievement in African American boys within the curriculum is to increase the quantity of texts that deal with sociopolitical and or "real-life" issues. Studies indicate higher levels of engagement in and among African American males when teachers incorporate texts that deal with sociopolitical and or "real-life" issues (Tatum, 2006; Tyson, 1999). Accordingly, teachers should work to increase the number of texts that are available in the classroom that deal with issues of racism, classism, sexism, divorce, financial difficulties, bullying, etc. Further, two examples of "real-life" or sociopolitical texts that can be used in early childhood and elementary classrooms with African American boys are *Getting Through Thursday* by Melrose Cooper or *Everett Anderson's Nine Month Long* by Lucille Clifton.

Classroom Context

One strategy teachers can implement to increase reading achievement in African American boys in the classroom context is to integrate active reading strategies (Brozo, 2002) into their daily reading instruction. As mentioned earlier, there are multiple neurological, social, and cultural factors that make African American boys less prone to sitting and reading passively for long periods of times than girls. In an effort to address these needs, teachers should engage African American boys in active literacy strategies (Zambo & Brozo, 2009; Wilhelm, 2002). In short, active literacy strategies are reading strategies that require readers to become active participants during reading interactions. Some examples of active reading strategies include but are not limited to: using movement and kinesthetic devices to sound out words; rapping and singing poems and passages; Reader's Theatre; process drama; reading in humorous voices to practice fluency skills; dancing out events from a text;

participating in a faux debate concerning the multiple perspectives presented in texts; using graphic organizers; and creating art projects to retell and summarize main events. Unlike more traditional approaches to reading instruction, active reading strategies offer the potential of higher levels of reading engagement among African American boys who will be required to "do" something rather than simply sit and listen. Further, active literacy strategies aid teachers in teaching in ways that are more consistent with the learning styles of most African American boys.

Another way teachers can respond to issues of reading underachievement in African American boys in the classroom is by changing *how* texts are read. As stated earlier, it is common for many early childhood and elementary teachers to read disproportional quantities of fictional texts in their classrooms. In keeping with this genre of text, early childhood and elementary teachers tend to read texts from what Rosenblatt (1995) refers to as an aesthetic stance (Boltz, 2007). That is, early childhood and elementary teachers tend to read in ways that require students to focus on personal meanings and feelings (Vasquez, 2010). Importantly, reading in uncritical ways can have a negative impact on African American boys, as boys tend to prefer reading in ways that focus on the "facts" reading (Boltz, 2007). Teachers can respond to this issue in two ways. First, teachers can carefully analyze the questions used during read-aloud, comprehension, and reading response activities to make sure there are equal numbers of questions that encourage readers to focus on personal and concrete meanings while reading. Failure to do so may create reading interactions where girls are favored more than boys (Clark, 2006). Next, teachers can counter this issue by encouraging African American boys to read texts from a critical standpoint. That is, teachers can encourage African American boys to read texts while paying close attention to issues of power and marginality. Regardless of the genre of text, teachers should encourage African American boys to interrogate textual events with regard to issues of power and marginalization. Not only will reading texts critically lead to higher levels of engagement among African American boys, this process may also lead to sociopolitical activism outside of the classroom as well (Tyson, 1999).

A third instructional strategy teachers can use to increase reading underachievement in African American boys in the classrooms concerns building on the multiple literacies that African American boys bring to the classroom. Scholars indicate that African American males are frequently literate in ways that transcend traditional notions of school literacy (Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Tatum, 2005). In keeping with this notion, Tatum (2005) outlines a typology of various types of literacies that African American males are likely to possess:

1) cultural; 2) emotional; and 3) social. Teachers must begin to *acknowledge* and *build* on these multiple literacies and linguistic commonalities in order to make connections to the literacies that are valued most in school contexts. Rather than viewing African American boys as non-readers or having reading deficiencies, teachers must begin to acknowledge the non-school literacies that many African American boys bring into the classroom. Moreover, teachers must find organic and authentic ways of building connections between these out of school literacies and the literacies needed to be successful in school contexts. To this end, three additional types of out of school literacies that can be potentially used to help African American boys acquire in school literacies (based on their outcomes with boys in general) are video games, popular culture, and the new literacies (Newkirk, 2002; Sandford & Madill, 2007; Herbert & Pagnani, 2010) (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Strategies within the Critical Contexts*

What can teachers do within the curriculum context to increase reading achievement in African American boys?
• Use culturally relevant texts • Use texts with male characters more often • Use texts with sociopolitical themes • Uses texts with "real-life" themes
What can teachers do within the classroom context to increase reading achievement in African American boys?
• Use active literacy strategies • Encourage critical literacy approaches • Support, draw from, and incorporate out of school literacies
What can whole schools do to increase reading achievement in African American boys?
• Reform whole-school behavior systems • Develop and implement Alternative Reading Support Systems (ARSS) • Create and implement reading programs that highlight African American males as readers

Comprehensive School Context

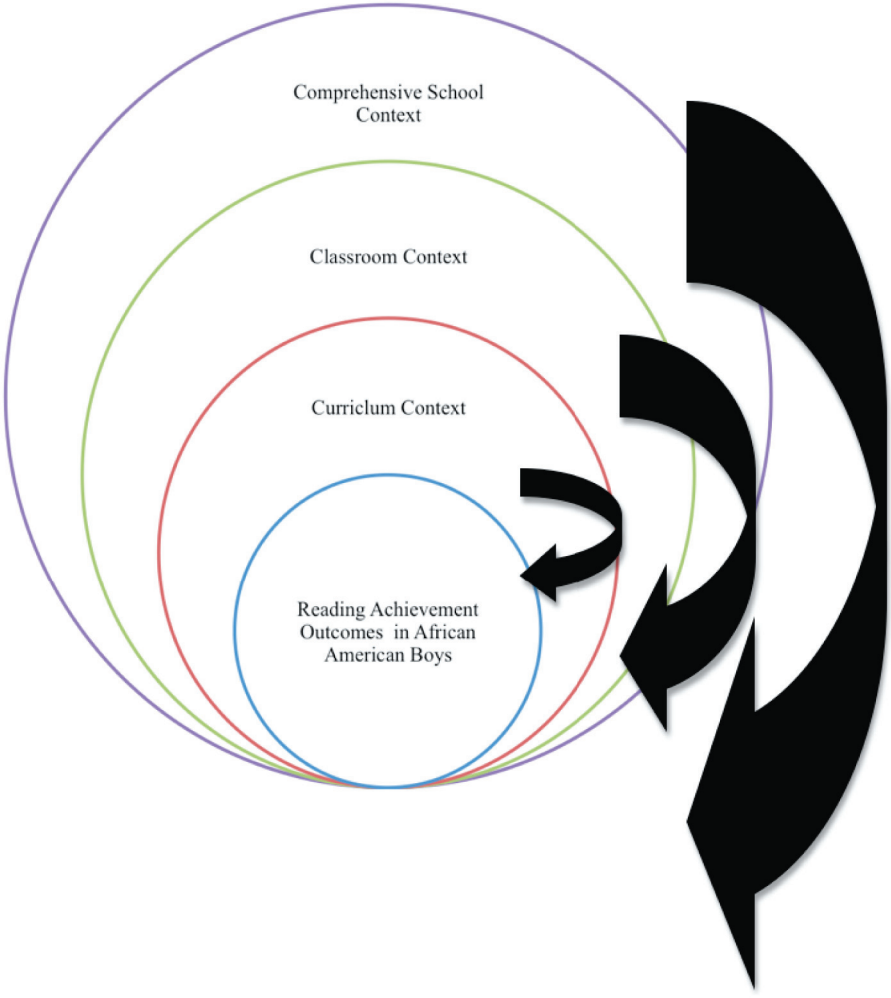
What can schools do, as a whole, to increase reading achievement in African American boys? We know that in order for children to achieve at optimal levels, it

is necessary for schools to work collaboratively toward creating and implementing robust literacy programs that effectively serve all children. Thus, it is extremely important for schools to develop and implement whole school approaches to increasing reading underachievement in African American boys. With that being said, I offer three strategies for entire schools to adopt as a means of increasing reading achievement in African American boys. The first strategy whole schools can use to increase reading achievement in African American boys is to develop alternative behavior management systems that center on keeping African American boys in the classroom during reading instructional times. As mentioned previously, African American boys are impacted more often than other students groups by disciplinary, suspension, and expulsion policies and procedures in most schools (Kunjufu, 1982). Frequently, these policies and procedures result in African American boys missing a considerable amount of instructional time and content. To keep African American boys from missing fundamental reading skills that are necessary for future reading proficiency, school administrators and classroom teachers must develop classroom behavior management systems and policies that work to redirect rather than reprimand boys for not meeting teachers' and administrators' behavior expectations (Noguera, 2003;Ladson-Billings, 2011). Rather than "pulling out" African American boys who do not meet teachers' and administrators' behavior expectations as has traditionally been the focus of many "zero tolerance" behavior management systems, schools must work collectively to develop and implement policies and procedures that keep them in the classroom and in the school. Now, I am in no way suggesting that administrators and teachers should tolerate inappropriate behaviors that violate classroom and school behavior policies. Instead, I am suggesting that teachers and administrators take the factors that impact reading underachievement in African American boys presented in this article into consideration when making disciplinary decisions that are in the best interests of African American boys.

An additional whole-school means of combating reading underachievement in African American boys is to develop and implement what I call Alternative Reading Support Systems (ARSS). In clearer terms, schools can provide reading support systems that serve as alternatives to traditional "pull-out" or "after-school" reading intervention and support initiatives. In a traditional sense, these ARSS can be used as intervention and remediation for African American boys who are experiencing difficulties in reading. At the same time, these support systems can also be used as enrichment opportunities for African American boys who are currently reading on or above grade-level expectations. In an effort to meet the diverse needs of African American boys at a particular school, teachers must be willing to implement these reading support systems before school, after school, during lunch, and even on Saturday or Sunday mornings. Moreover, teachers must

also be willing to implement these support systems at school, at home, at church, or any location that works for best for the students involved. The fundamental idea behind these support systems is that schools would develop and implement reading support systems that meet the specific needs of the African American boys involved. A salient example of what an Alternative Reading Support System may look like is seen in Brinson's (2007) description of an innovative program with African American boys in a local barbershop entitled Boys Booked on Barbershops (B-BOB). In short, reading nooks were established in the participating barbershops to encourage boys and their parents to read to each other while waiting for their turn to get a haircut. The boys who participated in the program not only demonstrated increased reading engagement, but they also demonstrated significant reading achievement gains over time. Although a teacher did not initiate this particular program, it, nonetheless, illustrates how an ARSS might be developed in conjunction with community members to address reading underachievement in African American boys in alternative ways. As mentioned previously, much of the discourse surrounding African American males and reading is deficit oriented (Haddix, 2010). This discourse has and continues to have a negative impact on both African American boys and their teachers (Steele, 1997). Schools can work toward countering this negative discourse by creating and implementing reading programs that spotlight African American males as proficient readers and writers. Schools can develop and implement literacy programs for African American boys that are led by other African American males in the school and local community as a means of countering pervasive stereotypical notions of the African American male as a "struggling", "poor" or "non" reader. Because stereotypes arise out of one's personal experiences and exposures (or lack thereof) with particular groups in society (Steel, 1997), it is likely that teachers who hold deficit conceptions about African American boys and reading will change their thinking as a result of seeing African American males (at all age levels) who engage in reading on a consistent basis. At the same time, it is also likely that (through prolonged exposure to other African American males who engage in and enjoy reading activities and challenge dominant stereotypes) African American boys will change how they think of themselves in relation to reading as well. These programs will help African American boys move from seeing reading as something that is un-masculine (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) or counter cultural (Irving & Hudley, 2008) to something they enjoy and desire to engage in on a consistent basis. Again, because there is a direct relationship between reading engagement and reading achievement, reading achievement outcomes in this group are likely to improve as well (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Contexts that Contribute to Reading Underachievement in African American boys*



Conclusion

In this article I have outlined several factors that contribute to reading underachievement in African American boys in early childhood and elementary contexts. The causes I discuss here stem from African American boys being members of two groups (boys and African American males) that historically underachieved in reading. The factors that contribute to reading underachievement in African American boys transcend multiple schooling contexts (see Figure 2). Any robust attempt at addressing this issue warrants an approach that utilizes strategies across multiple contexts. As means of attending to this issue, I offer a multi-contextual approach to addressing reading underachievement in African American boys. Prior to implementing the multi-contextual approach discussed in this article, teachers and schools must be willing to undertake two important commitments in order to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. First, teachers and schools must commit to being part of the solution rather than continuing to articulate the problem. Teachers and schools must move beyond simply *reiterating* the problem and toward restructuring resources to *resolve* the problem. In other words, teachers must be willing to reject passive notions such as "that's just how African American boys are" or " African American boys just don't like reading" toward actively embracing new means of combating this problem. Unless this initial commitment to working actively toward finding solutions to this problem of underachievement in African American boys, teachers and school will inevitably continue to perpetuate deficit model or "blame the victim" approaches to addressing this issue.

Second, teachers and schools must make the commitment to work beyond the classroom. The issue of reading underachievement in African American boys is linked to multiple factors that span across multiple contexts. As such, teachers and schools can no longer emphasize approaches to combating this issue that involve classroom strategies exclusively. Teachers must be willing to commit to working beyond the classroom and school context as needed in order to combat this issue of reading underachievement in African American boys. They must be willing to formulate and implement programs and partnerships that respond to underachievement in African American boys in and across curriculum, classroom, and community contexts. Failure to do so will only produce limited progress toward eradicating this achievement disparity as we journey through the 21st century.

References

Anderson, J., Anderson, A., Lynch, J., & Shapiro, J. (2004). Examining the effects of gender and genre on interactions in shared book reading. *Reading Research and Instruction*, *43*(4), 1-20.

Anderson, K. A., Howard, K. E., & Graham, A. (2007). Reading achievement, suspensions, and african american males in middle school. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, *2* (2), 43-63.

Askov, E. N., & Fischbach, T. J. (1973). An investigation of primary pupils' attitudes toward reading. *Journal of Experimental Education*, *41*(3), 1-7.

Below, J. L., Skinner, C. H., Fearrington, J. Y., & Sorrell, C. A. (2010). Gender differences in early literacy: Analysis of kindergarten through fifth-grade dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills probes. *School Psychology Review*, *39*(2), 240-257.

Boltz, R. H. (2007). What we want: boys and girls talk about reading. *School Library Media Research*, 10. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/aasl/slmr

Bosacki, S., Elliott, A., Bajovic, M., & Akseer, S. (2009). Preadolescents' self-concept and popular magazine preferences. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *23*(3), 340.

Boykin, W. A., & Cunningham, R. T. (2001). The effects of movement expressiveness in story content and learning context on the analogical reasoning performance of African American children. *Journal of Negro Education*, *70*(1/2), 72–83.

Brizendine, L. (2006) *The female brain*. New York, NY: Morgan Road Books.

Brinson, S. A. (2007). Boys booked on barbershops: A cutting-edge literacy program. *Young Children*, *62*(2), 42-48.

Brown, L. (2005). America's black male: Disadvantaged from birth to death. *University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) Perspectives on Urban Education*, 3(2), 1–16.

Brozo, W. (2002) *To be a boy, to be a reader: Engaging teen and preteen boys in active Literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Chall, J. S. (1996). *Learning to read: The great debate.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Chapman, M., Filipenko, M., McTavish, M., Shapiro, J. (2007). First graders' preferences for narrative and/or information books and perceptions of other boys' and girls' book preferences. *Canadian Journal of Education, 30*(2), 531-553.

Chatterji, M. (2006). Reading achievement gaps, correlates, and moderators of early reading achievement: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study (ecls) kindergarten to first grade sample. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *98*(3), 489-507.

Clarke, L. W. (2006). Power through voicing others: Girls' positioning of boys in literature circle discussions. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *38*(1), 53-79.

Collins-Standley, T. , Gan, S. L. , Yu, H. J. and Zillmann, D. (1996) Choice of romantic, violent, and scary fairy-tale books by preschool girls and boys. *Child Study Journal, 26*(4), pp. 279-302.

Feger, M. (2006). I want to read: How culturally relevant texts increase student engagement in reading. *Multicultural Education, 13*(3) 18-19.

Gay, G. (2000). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gerstl-Pepin, C. I., & Woodside-Jiron, H. (2005). Tensions between the sciences of reading and a love of learning: One high-poverty school's struggle with nclb. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 38*(3), 232-241.

Gurian, M. (2001). *Girls and boys learn differently: A guide for teachers and parents*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Gurian, M. &Stevens, K. (2005). *The minds of boys: Saving our sons from falling behind in school and life.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Haddix, M. (2009). Black boys can write: Challenging dominant framings of African American males in literacy research. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 53*(4), 341-343.

Hall, L. A., & Piazza, S. V. (2008). Critically reading texts: What students do and how teachers can help. *Reading Teacher, 62*(1), 32-41.

Hamlon, H ., Thatcher, R., & Cline, M.(1999). Gender differences in the development of eec coherence in normal children. *Developmental Neuropsychology, 16*(3), 479–506.

Hebert, T. P., & Pagnani, A. R. (2010). Engaging Gifted Boys in New Literacies. *Gifted Child Today, 33*(3), 36-45.

Holzman, M. (2004). *Public education and black male students: A state report card.* Cambridge, MA: The Schott Foundation for Public Education.

Huidor, O., & Cooper, R. (2010). Examining the socio-cultural dimension of schooling in a racially integrated school. *Education and Urban Society, 42*(2), 143-167.

Irving, M. A., & Hudley, C. (2005). Cultural, mistrust, academic outcome expectations, and outcome values among african american adolescent men. *Urban Education, 40*(5), 476–496.

Jackson, T. O., & Boutte, G. S. (2009). Liberation literature: Positive cultural messages in children's and young adult literature at freedom schools. *Language Arts, 87*(2), 108-116.

Kinloch, V. (2010). To not be a traitor of black english: Youth perceptions of language rights in an urban context. *Teachers College Record, 112*(1), 103-141.

Kirkland, D. E. (2011). Listening to echoes: Teaching young black men literacy and the problem of ela standards. *Language Arts, 88*(5), 373-380.

Kirkland, D. E., & Jackson, A. (2009). We real cool: Toward a theory of black masculine literacies. *Reading Research Quarterly, 44*(3), 278-297.

Kunjufu, J. (1982). *Countering the conspiracy to destroy black boys.* Chicago, IL: African American Images.

Kush, J. & Watkins, M. (1996) Long-term stability of children's attitudes toward reading. *Journal of Educational Research, 89*(5), 315-319.

Kuykendall, C. (1992). *From rage to hope: Strategies for reclaiming black and hispanic students.* Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Ladson Billings, G. (2011). Boyz to men? Teaching to restore black boys' childhood. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 14*(1), 7-15.

Logan, S., & Johnston, R. (2009). Gender differences in reading ability and attitudes: examining where these differences lie. *Journal of Research in Reading, 32*(2), 199-214.

Marinak, B. A., & Gambrell, L. B. (2010). Reading motivation: Exploring the elementary gender gap. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 49*(2), 129-141.

McKenna, M. Kear, D. and Ellsworth, R. (1995) Children's attitudes toward reading: A national survey. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*(4), 934-956.

Mendez, L., & Knoff, H. M. (2003). Who gets suspended from school and why: A demographic analysis of schools and disciplinary infractions in a large school district. *Education and Treatment of Children, 26*(1), 30-51.

Millard, E. (1997). *Differently literate: Boys, girls, and the schooling of literacy.* London: Falmer.

Morgan, H. (2010). Improving schooling for cultural minorities: The right teaching styles can make a big difference. *Educational Horizons, 88*(2), 114-120.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *National Assessment of Educational Progress: Nation's report card.* Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). *National Assessment of Educational Progress: Nation's report card*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Noguera, P.A. (2003). The trouble with black boys: The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African American males. *Urban Education, 38*(4), 431–459.

Polite, V.C., & Davis, J.E. (Eds.). (1999). *African American males in school and society: Practices and policies for effective education.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Rosenblatt, L (1995). *Literature as exploration.* New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America.

Sainsbury, M. & Schagen, I. (2004). Attitudes to reading at ages nine and eleven. *Journal of Research in Reading, 27*(4), 373–386.

Sandford, K. & Madill, L. (2007). Understanding the power of new literacies through video game play and design. *Canadian Journal of Education, 30* (2), 432-455.

Sax, L. (2005) Why gender matters: *What parents and teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences.* NY, New York: Doubleday.

Sax, L. (2006). Six degrees of separation: What teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex difference. *Educational Horizons, 84*, 190–212.

Shade, B. J., Kelly, C., & Oberg, M. (1997). Creating culturally responsive classrooms. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Smith, M.C. (1990). A longitudinal investigation of reading attitude development from childhood to adulthood. *The Journal of Educational Research, 83*, 215–219.

Smith, S. (2004). The non-fiction reading habits of young successful boy readers: forming connections between masculinity and reading. *Literacy, 38*(1), 10-16.

Smith, M. & Wilhelm, J. (2002). *Reading don't fix no chevys: Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Spironelli, C., Penolazzi, B., & Angrilli, A. (2010). Gender Differences in reading in school-aged children: An early erp study. *Developmental Neuropsychology, 35* (4), 357-375.

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*(6), 613–629.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of african americans. Journal of Personality and *Social Psychology, 69*(5), 797–811.

Sullivan, M. (2004). Why johnny won't read: Schools often dismiss what boys like. No wonder they're not wild about reading. *School Library Journal, 50*(8), 36–39.

Tatum, A.W. (2005). *Teaching reading to black adolescent males: Closing the achievement gap.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Tatum, A. W. (2006). Engaging african american males in reading. *Educational Leadership, 63*(5), 44-49.

Tatum, A. W. (2008). Toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction: A focus on african american male adolescents and texts. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1), 155-180.

Twist, L. & Sainsbury, M. (2009). *Educational Research, 51*(2), 283-297.

Twist, L. , Gnaldi, M. and Schagen, I. (2004) Good readers but at a cost? Attitudes towards reading in england. *Journal of Research in Reading, 27*, 387-400.

Tyson, C. (1999) Shut my mouth wide open: Realistic fiction and social action. *Theory into Practice, 38*(3), 155-159.

Vasquez, V. (2010). Critical literacy isn't just for books anymore. *Reading Teacher, 63*(7), 614-616.

Webb-Johnson, G. (2002). Are schools ready for Joshua? Dimensions of african- american culture among students identified as having behavioral/emotional disorders. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 15*(6), 653– 671.

Wilhelm, J. D. (2002). *Action strategies for deepening comprehension*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Yopp, R., & Yopp, H. (2006). Informational texts as read-alouds at school and home. *Journal of Literacy Research, 38*(1), 37-51.

Zambo, D. & Brozo, W. G. (2009). *Bright beginnings for boys: engaging young boys in literacy.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

About the Author

Terry Husband is Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Literacy at Illinois State University